

# The First Sermon Preached in Australia

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The first sermon in Australia was delivered on February 3, 1788, just days after the arrival of the First Fleet in Port Jackson (modern-day Sydney). It was preached by Reverend Richard Johnson, the chaplain appointed to the colony by the British government.

Reverend Johnson conducted the open-air service under a large tree near what is now the corner of Bligh and Hunter Streets in Sydney. His sermon was based on Psalm 116:12-13, which asks, *“What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.”*

The choice of this verse reflected a spirit of gratitude, resilience, and hope for the fledgling colony, which had just endured a perilous 250-day voyage across the oceans—a journey during which 48 people perished at sea.

The service itself would have included Morning Prayer, the Great Litany, a sermon, and communion. While the specific content of Johnson’s sermon isn’t documented, it’s likely that it followed the formal and rhetorical style typical of late 18th-century Anglican sermons.

As the first religious leader in the colony, Johnson faced immense challenges. There was no church building, limited support, and a population largely indifferent or hostile to religion.

At the time, Governor Arthur Phillip, who focused on feeding and housing soldiers and convicts in the colony’s harsh early years, could spare no labour for church construction. Services were held outdoors, and even after four years, Johnson’s appeals for churches in Sydney and Parramatta were ignored.

In June 1793, frustrated by inaction, Johnson began building a church himself. By September, he had completed a 500-seat structure for £67. Before it burned down in 1798, he and his wife Mary taught 150–200 children there. Nevertheless, he was deeply

committed to his mission, not only preaching but also establishing schools and advocating for moral and spiritual development in the penal settlement.

Reverend Johnson's first sermon marks a foundational moment in Australia's religious and cultural history. It symbolises Australia's deeply Christian foundations and laid the groundwork for the nation's future church and the institutions Christians would establish. Today, a plaque near the site marks this significant moment in Australian history.

While the original sermon text has not survived, the Scripture chosen and the circumstances of the service provide insight into Reverend Johnson's intentions and the spiritual foundation he sought to establish in the early days of the Australian colony.